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AUTHOR	Nelson, Laura; Purnell, Rogeair
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ABSTRACT

The challenges faced by low-income parents as they pursued an associate's degree or postsecondary credential and the effects of the comprehensive student services offered by the CalWORKs community college program were examined through focus groups at the following California community colleges: Grossmont College; Sacramento City College; and Santa Monica College. The study included focus groups of 10 to 12 CalWORKs participants at each of the three colleges and focus groups involving five CalWORKs nonparticipants from two of the colleges and one CalWORKs nonparticipant from the third. The focus group participants benefited greatly from the comprehensive services offered by the CalWORKs program and its staff, whom the participants described as knowledgeable and empathetic. The academic, personal, career, and employment-related assistance provided by CalWORKs staff helped many students persist in school, particularly during times of crisis or doubt. Juggling the responsibilities of parenting, school, and work while satisfying county program requirements proved an ongoing challenge for many students. Some of those pressures were eased by the availability of good, stable child care and affordable housing; support from

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family, peers, and employers; and having clear educational plans. (Eighty-one footnotes are included. Summaries of CalWORKs community college programs and information on the focus group methodology are appended.) (MN)

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Opening Doors to Earning Credentials

Supporting CalWORKs Students at California Community Colleges

An Exploratory Focus Group Study

Laura Nelson
Rogéair Purnell

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Overview

The Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC) is launching an ambitious demonstration initiative called Opening Doors to Earning Credentials. Opening Doors is designed to help nontraditional students — at-risk youth, low-wage working parents, and unemployed individuals — earn college credentials as the pathway to better jobs with higher pay. This exploratory study investigated the challenges working low-income parents face as they pursued an Associate's degree or postsecondary credential, and it examined how comprehensive student services offered by the CalWORKs community college program affected students' persistence. Attention was paid both to the barriers that a sample of recipients of Temporary Aid for Needy Families (TANF) navigated and the supports they received while they pursued their educational goals at three community colleges in California. The results of this study have important implications for public agencies, community colleges, and policymakers who develop strategies and services that affect low-income parents' access to and persistence in the community college system.

Key Findings

- Focus group participants benefited greatly from the comprehensive services offered by the CalWORKs community college program and its staff, whom the participants described as knowledgeable and empathic. The academic, personal, career, and employment-related assistance provided by program staff helped many students persist in school, particularly during times of crisis or doubt. In addition to providing clear and consistent educational planning and counseling that allowed students to monitor their progress, staff also helped them navigate the community college system early in their tenure and connected them to other on-campus and off-campus services for which they were eligible. Without this assistance, some students felt that they may have forced to stop their coursework or drop out of school.

- Juggling the responsibilities of parenting, school, and work while satisfying requirements imposed by the county was an on-going challenge for many students. Some of these pressures were eased by the availability of good, stable child care and affordable housing; the support of family, peers, and employers; and by having clear educational plans. Participation in work-study provided students an opportunity to work on campus or in flexible positions with employers that were sensitive to the needs of working parents who were enrolled in school.

- Students did not have much opportunity to explore educational and career options or to enroll in and complete remedial classes that would help prepare them to begin a course of study. County rules allow TANF recipients 18 to 24 months to work toward their degree before they face sanctions on the adult portion of their grant. But time spent investigating alternative courses of study or taking remedial coursework often increased the amount of time focus group participants needed to complete their majors beyond the time permitted.

This study was made possible through the assistance and cooperation of Grossmont College, Sacramento City College, and Santa Monica College, the California Community College Chancellor's Office staff, the focus group participants, and the financial support of the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.

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The Authors

Executive Summary

Community colleges are well suited to be the focal point in helping low-income students earn postsecondary credentials. They are well-rounded institutions, offering both academic instruction and occupational/technical training. Students can earn an Associate's degree, certificates in many areas of occupational training, licenses, and other credentials, and they can pursue the opportunity to continue their education at four-year institutions of higher learning. Community colleges are also well prepared to address the needs of students with low basic skills through remedial, basic skill, and General Educational Development (GED) programs. Most community colleges have an open door policy and tuition is affordable relative to that for four-year universities; many have shown great flexibility and resourcefulness responding to the changing demographics of the populations they serve and local labor market conditions. Their agility is one of their virtues. Yet, some challenges remain in community colleges' ability to attract and retain low-income working parents and adults. In some cases, many low-wage workers never apply or a high number enroll only to drop out.

The findings presented in this report summarize the results of six student focus groups conducted as part of the Opening Doors to Earning Credentials project. Using a qualitative approach, this study provides an exploratory look at the supports and barriers low-income working parents — particularly those who are receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) — navigate as they pursue the goal of a postsecondary credential.[1] Special attention was paid to the services and assistance provided by the CalWORKs community college programs.

Scope and Methods of the Opening Doors CalWORKs Study

Three colleges, each with a diverse student body, were selected to participate in a set of focus groups to examine issues affecting CalWORKs participants' access to and retention in a program of studies while pursuing postsecondary education. The participating schools were:

- Grossmont College, in El Cajon;
- Sacramento City College, in Sacramento;
- Santa Monica College, in Los Angeles.

[1]In California, CalWORKs (California Work Opportunities and Responsibility to Kids) is the name that the state has given to its TANF program.

To explore how important various supports — particularly the CalWORKs community college program — have been in helping students succeed, two groups of CalWORKs students were targeted: one who were accessing the CalWORKs community college program and another who had not accessed these services. A total of 47 participants (37 of whom were accessing CalWORKs community college services) took part in the focus groups. The groups were largely comprised of women of color who were parenting, attending school at least part-time, and working at least 10 hours per week. Despite efforts to recruit students who were not accessing the community college program services, the number of participants in this group was too small to permit reliable comparisons between the two target groups to be made. Much of the report focuses on the stories and experiences of those students who had received assistance at the CalWORKs community college programs.

Main Themes from the Focus Groups

The majority of students had accessed a number of supportive services to help them stay in school. The CalWORKs community college program served as the main source of support for many of the focus group participants and as a key referral point for other on-campus and off-campus services. Academic, personal, and employment and career counseling were all provided to students through the program. Students particularly appreciated the emotional support program staff provided. They liked the fact that the staff understood the challenges they faced as working students and parents and considered these issues when advising them.

Overall, the following themes emerged:

- **Balancing school, family, and work was challenging.** Successfully juggling all the responsibilities of school, work, and family and requirements imposed by CalWORKs was stressful, and some students reported difficulty in finding time to study. In general, participants reported that friends, family, and even the college and their employers were supportive of their efforts to complete their degrees, which helped offset some of the stress and barriers they faced in dealing with so many obligations. The availability of stable, high-quality child care and affordable housing also helped ease students' stress. However, many students experienced educational histories marked by personal and family crises that hindered their progress towards their degrees.

- **Counseling and academic assistance were keys to students' retention and advancement.** Given the many responsibilities they had to juggle, many CalWORKs students found that a structured educational plan that

was updated and reviewed regularly helped them to stay focused and on task. Access to a counselor who knew the student's personal circumstances and could provide advice that was consistent helped ensure that the student's needs and family concerns were taken into account during the educational planning and advisory process. Having counselors who were also knowledgeable about the special services for which low-income students were eligible was also important to helping students access needed supports in a coordinated and nonduplicative manner.

- **Advocacy on behalf of the students by the CalWORKs community college program staff with the county welfare offices was a critical support.** Several students needed the help of someone at the college to access some of the available county services and supports. Because they were knowledgeable about supports and services made available to students by the welfare system, the CalWORKs community college staff were better able than other on-campus counselors to help students address issues related to their welfare-to-work requirements and eligibilities. In situations where students had caseworkers who did not support their enrollment in college as an allowable activity, provide an expected support, or approve their educational plan, the CalWORKs community college staff often advocated on students' behalf, stepped in to provide the needed support, or helped students submit the necessary paperwork to have their cases reviewed. Without such assistance, some students may have simply stopped their engagement in the college program or dropped out.

- **Work-study positions were valued.** Work-study positions provided students an opportunity to work in flexible jobs for employers who understood a student's need to vary adjust work schedules to accommodate class schedules and requirements. On-campus positions offered students with no work history a chance to gain experience with the support of the CalWORKs community college program staff. Some students were concerned that cuts to the work-study program could negatively affect their ability to find jobs that would allow them to go to school and make steady progress towards their educational goals.

- **Peer support was important for student persistence.** Emotional support, shared information and resources, and informal counseling among peers encouraged some students to stay in school. Students often understood firsthand the challenges their peers faced, often in a way that family or friends could not. These informal support systems were so important

that some students felt that distance learning would not be an attractive option for much of their coursework.

- **Remedial coursework and educational exploration were often linked to long-term enrollment.** Some students were required to complete remedial coursework in order to enroll in classes that would help them complete their educational plans. Others had changed their majors, as many college students do, which compelled them to enroll in additional classes. This often meant that the students would have to remain enrolled for longer periods, potentially affecting their ability to complete their coursework within the county time limits. Moreover, the additional coursework required students to spend extra time and money in order to complete their degrees.

Implications of the Study's Findings

The information gathered as part of this focus group study suggests that low-income students greatly benefit from access to coordinated and consistent student services. Both CalWORKs community college program staff and the students who accessed these services spoke highly of the comprehensiveness and effectiveness of the program's service and of the positive influence it had had on students' persistence in school. Services could be enhanced if the following additions and changes to the current program structure were made.

Students would benefit from having more time to complete their educational programs, which often take longer than the county's 24-month time limit allows. Although counties were not permitted to disallow a CalWORKs student's education plan solely because it cannot be completed within an 18- or 24-month timeframe, students reported that the county CalWORKs seemed to prefer that participants enroll in an educational program that could be completed within that allotted time. However, the issues CalWORKs students faced suggested that a longer time limit could potentially greatly enhance retention and persistence rates if students who had made reasonable progress on their educational plans were permitted to continue to go to school and receive their TANF benefits beyond 24 months. Additional time would also allow students greater opportunities to explore educational and career options and make better-informed decisions about their educational and career goals before deciding on their major. Finally, students needing remedial assistance could complete necessary coursework before beginning their major course of study.

Many students who were eligible for CalWORKs community college program services were not aware that the program existed. Several students found out about the CalWORKs program only after walking past the office where it was housed or by talking

with fellow students who had accessed its services. Although the CalWORKs community college programs conduct a variety of outreach activities, students felt that the program should continue to market itself to attract additional students and insure that those who are eligible are aware of the comprehensive services it offered.

Students could be helped in their educational and career planning through exposure to work-study positions that were more relevant to their employment goals. Some students looked to work-study positions as a way to earn money while in school and not as a means to gain work experience germane to their course of study or long-term career goals. For students without previous work experience, work-study positions allowed CalWORKs staff to supervise and support them more closely in on-campus positions. Students with some work experience and clear educational and career goals might be considered for positions that provide them hands-on experience in activities that would prepare them for the career of their choice. Access to work-study positions like these may help some students change their educational plan early in their college tenure if they find that their chosen career is not what they were expecting.

Work with students to select educational and training programs that will prepare them for jobs that meet the labor force needs of the regional economy. Many students appeared not to have investigated how their particular educational and career goals related to their future income and ability to support their families effectively. The educational planning and counseling that students receive — prior to embarking on a certain course of study, for example — could be strengthened by a concerted investigation of how their proposed educational plans and career goals will affect their wages, benefits, and promotion and advancement opportunities.

The Opening Doors Study

One key current public policy challenge is how to support low-wage[1] workers in their efforts to become self-supporting through career advancement and wage progression. While a wide range of studies has shown that increased years of schooling — and, in particular, earning a college certificate or other credential — are correlated with higher earnings in the labor market,[2] surprisingly few low-wage workers enroll in college.[3] Low-wage working adults face barriers at the point of access (many of them are unfamiliar with the college system, lack the knowledge to apply, feel unprepared academically, or cannot see how to arrange their budgets and schedules to allow for study),[4] and those who do enroll confront a number of challenges to school persistence.[5] Opening Doors to Earning Credentials is a project designed to learn how best to help nontraditional students earn community college credentials as the pathway to better jobs with higher wages.

In 2000-2001, the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC) conducted interviews and focus groups at community college campuses across the country both to identify some of the most innovative programs for working students and to understand what kinds of obstacles low-income individuals face in accessing college and in staying in school. As part of this study, in the spring of 2001 MDRC conducted 18 focus groups with current, former, and potential community college students at six college campuses to learn about their circumstances, experiences, and perspectives. These conversations demonstrated the immense efforts that students make to juggle work, family, and school responsibilities and the hurdles that potential students face before they can consider enrolling in college. Focus group participants spoke about their need for new forms of financial aid, additional child care, alternative class schedules and formats, and improved support services on campus for working students.[6]

MDRC received additional funding from the Hewlett Foundation to expand this qualitative element of the Opening Doors study, focusing on community college students in California. This study, smaller in scope than the national focus group project, built on the findings of the earlier research. In the California study, MDRC focused on a program of instruction (including new and redesigned curricula), student support services, and work experience —

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[1]As with previous Opening Doors reports, individuals or families defined as "low-wage" and "low-income" have household incomes that fall below the federal poverty level. See Lazare, Fremstad, and Goldberg, 2000.

[2]Grubb, 1999; Mather, 2002; Martinson and Strawn, 2002.

[3]Acs, Phillips, and McKenzie, 2000.

[4]Brawer, 1996.

[5]Matus-Grossman and Gooden, 2002.

[6]For details on this study, see Matus-Grossman and Gooden (2002).

called the CalWORKs community college program — for welfare recipients who are current community college students.[7] At three colleges, MDRC conducted focus groups with two types of students: one with students who were taking advantage of the program of supports and one with students who were eligible for the services but had not participated in the program. These six focus groups were conducted in April 2002. The focus groups allowed MDRC to explore the importance of intensive student support services for low-income working parents, with an emphasis on students combining study, work, and family responsibilities while enrolled in college as their welfare-to-work activity. Like the community college students in MDRC's national Opening Doors study, students in the California focus groups were attempting to balance a variety of responsibilities relating to school, work, and family, but many of the focus group members who were taking advantage of the campus CalWORKs services reported that the program helped them to stay in school by offering personal attention, help in navigating the institutional demands of both the college and the county welfare office, and assistance with child care, book expenses, and transportation.[8]

California Community Colleges

According to the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office (CCCCO), California's community college system is the largest system of higher education in the world. The CCCCO oversees 108 colleges in 72 districts, with more than 2.5 million students.[9] California has by far more community college students than any other state, and the population of community college students in California is extraordinarily diverse in terms of national origin, race/ethnicity, age, and income level. The State of California encourages access to higher education in the community colleges by keeping fees low; the current fee per credit unit for state residents is $11, and California has a Board of Governors Enrollment Fee Waiver program to cover enrollment fees for low-income students. Even the enormous budget shortfall in fiscal year 2002–2003 did not lead to an increase in fees at the community college level in California. Students do not need to have graduated from high school: Anyone over age 18 who "can benefit from instruction" can enroll in a California community college. The CCCCO Web site makes it clear that colleges are open to nonresidents, to immigrants, and to people with limited English ability.

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[7]"CalWORKs" (California Work Opportunities and Responsibility to Kids) is the name that the state of California has given to its Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program. In this report, the word "CalWORKs" alone refers to TANF, while "CalWORKs college program" refers to the program of services for welfare recipients who are enrolled in community college.

[8]This focus group report is an exploratory, noncomparative study of a self-selected group of CalWORKs community college students at three California community colleges.

[9]CCCCO Web site: www.cccco.edu.

In the 2002 California study, MDRC conducted focus groups at three community colleges: Grossmont College in El Cajon (San Diego County), Sacramento City College, and Santa Monica College. Sacramento City College and Santa Monica College are urban campuses; Grossmont College is situated a few miles east of the city of San Diego. All three are large community colleges serving a diverse student population (Table 1). Appendix A offers brief descriptions of the colleges and their CalWORKs college programs.

Table 1: California Community Colleges in the Opening Doors 2002 Focus Group Study

	Grossmont College	Sacramento City College	Santa Monica College
Total student enrollment, 2002	17,864	21,571	33, 304
CalWORKs participants on campus	840	1,142	1,173
CalWORKs college program students	301	542	350

The CalWORKs Community College Program

California has invested more of its Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) funding in postsecondary education than any other state.[10] In 1997, as part of the new legislation called CalWORKs (California Work Opportunities and Responsibility to Kids), the state assembly allocated $65 million in General Funds along with $8 million in state TANF funds and $8 million in federal TANF funds (for a total of $81 million) to develop and support programs on community college campuses specifically for welfare recipients.[11] This allocation explicitly recognized the role of community colleges in the preparation of welfare recipients for work and established the CalWORKs community college program. The budget language specified that the following services be part of the CalWORKs college programs:

- **Service coordination** between county welfare offices and other community services and all other campus programs and services, to track student progress, to help students access campus support services, and to

[10]Based on a number of reconnaissance site visits across the country, MDRC has learned that California and Kentucky are spending a larger portion of their TANF dollars on postsecondary education than any other state.

[11]See California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office (CCCCO), 2001.

provide comprehensive child care, financial aid, and job placement or work activities

- **Curriculum development** to expand the number of short-term and open-entry, open-exit vocational programs as well as work experience, internships, concurrent adult basic education (ABE), English as a Second Language (ESL), and other vocational training
- **Work-study** opportunities and wages to help current welfare recipients meet their CalWORKs work participation requirements, earn money, and gain useful work experience while attending college
- **Subsidized child care** in either on-campus or off-campus centers or by private citizens chosen by participating students, via a voucher system
- **Job development and job placement services** for students and to help students find employment, preferably full-time, after completing their educational programs
- Starting in 1999, **postemployment services** for students who had been receiving CalWORKs cash benefits no more than two years earlier (Postemployment services are allowed only when colleges have served — or have attempted to serve — all current CalWORKs students.)

California's budget provided specific amounts (or percentages) for child care (at least $15 million) and for work-study opportunities as the principal service elements of the program. The budget mandated that $34.5 million be spent on direct services such as job development and placement, work study, instruction (under certain limited circumstances), or child care, and a total of at least two-thirds of the funds were to be spent on student services. The state funded the CalWORKs college programs at the same level until fiscal year 2002-2003, when statewide budget-tightening cut the amount to $63 million ($20 million of which was to come from college matching funds) from the initial amount of $81 million.

CalWORKs and the Education Option

The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996 is widely perceived to have limited the opportunities for welfare recipients to fulfill participation requirements by enrolling in education programs. Under TANF, vocational education training and attendance at a secondary school by teenage parents (or similar programs of study) are allowable activities counting toward the first 20 hours of each week under federal participation requirements, but there are several limitations. Vocational education and/or training (which *may* include postsecondary education) may count toward the state's

work participation rate, but for no more than 12 months for any individual, and no more than 30 percent of the state caseload may be credited with participation in vocational education training or be a parent under age 20 completing high school. Forty-four states allow education directly related to employment to fulfill work activity requirements; five do not, and two leave this to local discretion. PRWORA does not prohibit states from allowing individuals to participate in other education or training, but participation in these activities will not count toward the individual's work activity participation rate after a certain amount of time has passed.

In California, welfare recipients are required to engage in approved activities for at least 32 hours each week (35 hours for two-parent households), starting from the time the household enrolls in CalWORKs. Each participant's welfare-to-work plan specifies the activities in which she[12] is to engage in order to fulfill the work requirement. Education is an allowable activity if, after assessment,[13] it is determined that education will assist the individual in obtaining either her first job or a higher-paying job that will lead to self-sufficiency. Education is also allowed if the CalWORKs participant is already enrolled in an approved course of study[14] when she enrolls in welfare-to-work activities. (See the discussion of self-initiated programs, or SIPs, below.) After the initial activity period of 18 (or 24) months,[15] recipients are required to engage in paid, unsubsidized employment or community service; education no longer counts as an allowable activity (although CalWORKs participants may continue to attend school on their own time or, in some cases, may include study as one part of their community service plan).

In practice, CalWORKs participants may find it difficult to get approval to satisfy their work activity requirement through education programs.[16] Many California counties instilled a strong "work-first" philosophy in their CalWORKs caseworkers. This philosophy is often interpreted as "work only," despite the directives to offer more education and support services. Most California counties emphasize job search and paid work in explaining the

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[12]Although adult CalWORKs participants may be of either gender, the overwhelming majority are women, and so this report uses feminine pronouns.

[13]Although each CalWORKs participant should receive a vocational assessment from the county, not all assessments are completed.

[14]Counties identify courses of study that would lead to jobs in consultation with the education and training providers in the county, and the list is updated yearly with the providers' assistance. Students who wish to engage in a course of study not specified on the approved list may provide the county with affidavits from employers demonstrating a labor market or request a third-party assessment to determine whether their chosen course of study will lead to employment.

[15]If a recipient began receiving cash aid (TANF) on or after January 1, 1998, she would have 18 months of welfare-to-work activity, which could be extended by 6 months if that extension would assist in obtaining unsubsidized employment.

[16]Pre-focus group site visits, interviews with the CalWORKs staff at the participating colleges, and the student focus groups helped to illustrate the successes and challenges that students faced in gaining approval for education programs as part of their welfare-to-work plan.

CalWORKs program participation requirements. In some counties, eligibility workers and welfare-to-work case managers do little to make recipients aware that they have the option of education or training as part of their work activity plan. Many welfare-to-work participants learn about education or training options only if they fail to find a job in their initial job search activity and if, on assessment, they are found to lack critical employment skills. On the other hand, those CalWORKs participants who — at the point of creating a welfare-to-work plan — are already enrolled in an education or training program that culminates in a degree or certificate, in which they are making satisfactory progress and which leads to employment, are considered to be in a self-initiated program, or SIP, and are generally allowed to continue in their course of study.[17]

Despite these obstacles to enrollment, the CCCCO has reported that CalWORKs college programs have served a much larger number of students than originally forecast in the concept paper that preceded the initial budget allocation.[18] In academic year 2000-2001, for example, 47,118 students received campus CalWORKs services — 12 percent of the adult CalWORKs caseload (386,554)[19] — compared with an estimate of only 20,000 in the 1997 concept paper.

Details of the Campus CalWORKs Programs

All 108 California community colleges have implemented a campus CalWORKs program of some kind. Districts and campuses were allowed significant latitude in designing their programs, which vary in terms of policies and service offerings as well as in emphases, priorities, and staff expertise. The context of the county welfare policies that CalWORKs participants encounter and the local economy also vary, and CalWORKs college programs are expected to meet the locally inflected needs of participants.

Work-study is a central part of most CalWORKs college programs. Most, if not all CalWORKs work-study programs seek to use Federal Work Study funds (whenever appropriate under the Federal Work Study regulations) as the source of the required match, due to the fact that those funds (and any funds with which they are matched) are not counted as "earned income" against the TANF cash aid. CalWORKs work-study funds by themselves do count as earned income, and have the same impact on the calculation of TANF and food stamp amounts. Job developers work with students to provide placements either on- or off-

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[17]The 2000-2001 CCCCO report indicates that, among the 108 colleges, 47,118 CalWORKs students were served and that, of this total, 58 percent (27,552) were SIPs, 38 percent (17,921) were county-referred (a decrease from 20,089 referrals from the previous year), and 4 percent (1,645) received postemployment services (CCCCO, 2001).

[18]For a summary of the concept paper's assumptions, see CCCCO (2001).

[19]CCCCO, 2001.

campus to achieve the most convenient and appropriate work environment and experience in meeting students' personal and financial needs.

The primary intent of the child care funds is to offer supplemental child care at campus-based centers, but many colleges have limited on-campus slots, and several can only provide vouchers for private care. Some CalWORKs college funds are allowed for new vocational programs and curricular reform. Although in 1999 the legislature permitted up to 15 percent of the college CalWORKs allocation to be spent on postemployment services for former CalWORKs participants who were off aid for up to two years, the CCCCO reports that — since the first priority is service for current recipients and one must be off cash aid (which requires high earnings) — there is much greater demand for the original CalWORKs services than for postemployment services.[20] Table 2 summarizes the programs at each of the three campuses where MDRC conducted focus group research.

Other Support Programs for CalWORKs Participants and Other Disadvantaged Students

The CalWORKs college program is not the only source of supports for nontraditional students on California's community college campuses. *All* community college students may access regular campus-based academic, career, and personal counseling services; employment assistance; and various forms of campus-based, state and federal financial assistance.

"Educationally or economically disadvantaged"[21] California community college students — whether CalWORKs participants or not — may be eligible for special supports (including grants, tutoring, and counseling) through another program, called the Extended Opportunity Programs and Services (EOPS). EOPS students who are single parents and CalWORKs participants can receive additional services through Cooperative Agencies Resources for Education (CARE). CARE is similar to EOPS, but it targets single parents with children under 14 years of age. In addition to academic and supportive counseling, both campus CalWORKs and CARE may provide assistance with child care allowances, transportation grants, and books and supply stipends — but this may vary by college. EOPS offers supportive services to assist with educational planning, academic counseling, and tutoring as well as other educational assistance for students who are "educationally or economi-

[20]CCCCO, 2001.

[21]See California Community College Web site, keyword EOPS: www.accessresource.org/eops .

Table 2: Community College CalWORKs Program Services

	Grossmont College *Project Workplace*	Santa Monica College *CalWORKs Program*	Sacramento City College *CalWORKs Program*
Outreach/ recruitment	• County employment caseworkers, Extended Opportunity Programs and Services (EOPS), and other on-campus departments refer students to the program. • Do community events, post flyers and include EOPS materials.	• Word-of-mouth referrals from other offices on campus • Keep local Community-Based Organizations/Dept. of Social Services updated about services, courses. • Send reminder letters about events.	• Outreach is done to the campus and community, and students are self-referred or referred by their county caseworker.
Orientation	• Students have to complete an application form, and then an appointment is made to do an education plan and a training plan. • Contact is made with county caseworker for release of information, which is sent to job developer for work-study	• Students must come to an intake session prior to seeing a counselor.	• Offered twice a week; provides information about resources on campus and in the community; students fill out paperwork for intake and counseling appointments.
Personal counseling	• By appointment or drop-in	• By appointment or drop-in	• One full-time and two part-time master's-level counselors, by appointment or drop-in
Academic counseling	• By appointment or drop-in	• By appointment or drop-in	• Academic counseling
Career counseling and job placement	• Counselors provide career counseling, and the job developer does development work on- and off-campus.	• Job developer on staff; assistance with work-study positions	• One full-time job services staff member does job-related activities. All staff assist with career exploration. The program shares an office with a non-WIB-related "One-Stop"[xb] where students can do job search and career exploration.

	Grossmont College *Project Workplace*	Santa Monica College *CalWORKs Program*	Sacramento City College *CalWORKs Program*
Financial Benefits provided	• Helps accessing money from the county for books and transportation. Provide book money, child care, transportation when the county doesn't.	• Helps accessing money from the county for books and transportation. Provide book money when the county doesn't	• Resources are shared with students to help them access all financial benefits for which they are eligible.
Advocacy with Welfare caseworkers	• Works closely with students to address any issues related to their county requirements by advocating for students with the county caseworker. Fill in time log for activity compliance. Assist with paperwork and accessing county benefits for students.	• Provides some mediation with county caseworkers. Assist accessing county benefits for students	• An on-site county caseworker is housed in the office to address continuing cases (n=60-80), but if necessary staff also advocate with the county. Two full-time caseworkers provide ongoing advocacy for all students.
Connection with other student services assisting low-income students	• Strong linkage with EOPS, Cooperative Agencies Resources for Education (CARE), and New Horizons	• Informal, good relationships with EOPS	• An informal, good connection exists between CalWORKs and EOPS/CARE and financial aid.
Transportation assistance	• Students are encouraged to access this assistance through the county; the CalWORKs program provides this if county doesn't.	• Assists students in accessing funds from county	• Program provides emergency bus passes. • Assistance is also available through EOPS and the county.
Books and supplies	• Students are encouraged to access this assistance through the county; CalWORKs program provides this if county doesn't.	• Provided in cases where the county doesn't provide assistance	• Available through county CalWORKs and EOPS
Child care	• Helps with child care referrals; teach students about how to find good-quality child care	• Helps with child care referrals; child care available on-campus	• Provides resource referral; a limited number of vouchers are provided so students can arrange their own child care off-campus. Also, some child care is available on-campus.
Work-study	• Job developer assists students with work-study placements and job placement activities on- and off-campus.	• Provides counseling to students about work-study options	• Full-time Job Services staff member provides employment counseling, placement assistance, and follow-up to students and employers.

SOURCES: Pre-focus group site visits and interviews with CalWORKs program staff.

NOTES: [a] New Horizons recruits and assists single parents who are enrolled in a minimum of six units and who demonstrate financial need through academic support and financial assistance (Grossmont College Web site: www.grossmont.edu.

[b] This is not related to the One-Stop system of the Workforce Investment Board.

cally disadvantaged." Unlike CalWORKs participants, EOPS participants are not necessarily parents, but many CalWORKs students are eligible for both EOPS and CARE. EOPS requires students to meet with counselors at least three times each semester. EOPS grant and work-study awards may not exceed $1,800 per academic year (or the amount of the student's unmet need, whichever is less). To be eligible for EOPS and CARE, students must be enrolled in a minimum of 12 units of coursework each semester; and may not have completed more than 70 semester units of college coursework (not including remedial courses). As a result, many CalWORKs students do not meet the eligibility criteria. Each of these programs works in coordination to ensure that students do not receive duplicative services and that students' needs be addressed by matching the participant with the most relevant and useful resources for which she is eligible.

Students who are CalWORKs participants and whose education has been approved by the county as part of their welfare-to-work plan qualify for supports from the county welfare office (as distinct from the CalWORKs college programs). The county is responsible for reimbursements for books and supplies, for the lowest cost of transportation, and for payments for child care during the hours the CalWORKs participant is engaged in approved activities. CalWORKs participants who are studying at the community colleges are not, then, entirely dependent on the CalWORKs community college program for basic school supports. The CalWORKs community college program provides unique services that the county cannot and does not provide: academic advisement, college educational planning, and college case management services — that is, coordinating with and helping the student access the many services and programs throughout the college.

Methodology

This study was designed to learn directly from students about their experiences balancing school, family, and work responsibilities. On each college campus, participants were recruited for two focus groups: one composed of students who had participated in on-campus CalWORKs support services and another group composed of students who may have been eligible for such services but had not utilized them. To be considered for participation in this study, students had to be CalWORKs participants,[22] be employed at least 10 hours per week, and be currently enrolled in at least one course. Most, but not all, of the

[22] Although the initial focus of this study was on the CalWORKs community college program, it was found that many of the students who were eligible for and receiving CalWORKs community college program services were also accessing EOPS and CARE services; in effect, then, this study examines the CalWORKs program in addition to EOPS and CARE.

students were also current TANF recipients.[23] These groups were intended to provide an opportunity to hear from a broad range of low-income working students about how they are experiencing college; the institutional, personal, and situational issues that affect their persistence and progress through school; their experience of the supports designed for this group of students; and how students who are not taking advantage of these supports are managing. As with any focus group study, the information gained through this method is illustrative but not representative of the population of interest. With such small groups, the material gathered points to insights, trends, and important issues, but it does not allow researchers or policymakers to make definitive statements about overall circumstances; nor can comparisons among groups be drawn confidently.

To recruit student participants for the focus groups, a one-page flyer was prepared that described the study as an effort to learn "more about what it is like to be in college while working and taking care of family (and/or other) responsibilities"; the flyer also briefly described MDRC and its work. Potential participants were instructed to contact an MDRC staff person at a toll-free number to find out whether they were eligible to participate, based on the criteria outlined above, and, if so and they did participate, they would receive a $50 gift certificate for Target stores. Depending on the wishes of the individual college, the flyer and background materials were prepared on either MDRC or the CalWORKs college program's letterhead. To maintain the confidentiality of potential participants, each college was responsible for sending the letters out to all students or to a random sample of CalWORKs students for the two groups, based on student records.

MDRC conducted two focus groups on each campus: one for CalWORKs college program participants and one for nonparticipants. Each session ran for approximately two hours and included a light meal. The groups explored several questions — what services and supports had helped them stay in school, how they chose their courses of study, what services they had accessed and how useful had they found these services (or why had they not accessed services), and what were some of the typical problems they had faced as working parents. The sessions included open-ended discussions and structured exercises.[24]

Analysis of the focus groups incorporated several steps. Each group session was audiotaped, and the facilitators (the authors of this report) and the research assistants also took notes. Immediately following each session, the facilitators and research assistants dis-

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[23]Students who were recruited for the nonparticipant group were identified as potential participants based on statements that they had made on their college enrollment forms. Students were considered eligible for the focus group if at that time they indicated that they were receiving TANF (or other welfare benefits) and/or if the college identified them as potentially eligible for campus CalWORKs services. Overall, 5 of the 10 students who made up the nonparticipant group were not CalWORKs participants. However, the CalWORKs community college program only serves TANF recipients.

[24]Appendix B discusses the focus group methodology more fully.

cussed what they had heard, and they generated a list of initial themes. Later in the analysis, the authors listened to the tapes to confirm, reconsider, or refine impressions of the discussions and to identify key characteristic statements of focus group participants. Finally, MDRC requested college information (batched into groups, to ensure confidentiality) about focus group participants' basic demographic characteristics and academic progress, as well as information about the population of CalWORKs students on campus and about the general population of students. This information shows how well the focus groups reflect the population of CalWORKs students and also how well the CalWORKs students reflect the general student population.

Demography of Participants and Colleges

The students who came to the focus group sessions represent a range of individuals. Most of the participants are women, but the focus groups included a few men as well. Most participants were born and raised in the United States, but groups also included immigrant citizens and CalWORKs refugee-status individuals, including several students from eastern Europe. While most of the participants were in their twenties, groups also included some older students, including several grandmothers (none elderly), and one teenager. Overall, 37 students (31 women and 6 men) who were accessing CalWORKs services and 10 students (8 women and 2 men) who were not accessing services participated in the six focus groups. Most participants are female (89 percent). Whites made up the largest group (38 percent), followed by African-Americans (30 percent), Latinas/Latinos (13 percent), Asians/Pacific Islanders (9 percent), and others/unknown (11 percent). All the participants were caring for children, except for one 19-year-old student and one older immigrant refugee student.

How Well Do the Focus Group Participants Reflect the CalWORKs Student Population on the Three Campuses?

Focus groups are typically small, nonrandom samples drawn from a larger population. Although every effort was made to draw a random sample from those identified as CalWORKs recipient-students, the students who attended the focus group sessions were volunteers who may or may not share the experiences and circumstances of the larger population of CalWORKs students. In general, the age distribution in the focus groups was similar to that of the CalWORKs population at Grossmont College and at Sacramento City College; at Santa Monica College, however, the focus group participants were older, on average, than the CalWORKs population. The majority of focus group participants were continuing students (as opposed to new students or "other") as were the majority of all CalWORKs students on two of the three campuses. Most of the focus group participants are women, as is true of the CalWORKs student population. All but two of the male focus group participants

were refugee-status CalWORKs participants. Overall, the focus groups appear to be a fair reflection — in these dimensions, at least — of the population from which they were drawn.

One caveat is appropriate at this point: The students who attended the nonparticipant focus groups, in particular, may or may not represent the usual circumstances and opinions of CalWORKs student-recipients who do not take advantage of campus CalWORKs services. Few students responded to the solicitation letters sent to nonparticipants, and in the end a total of 10 students made up the nonparticipant sample, and those 10 persons were not equally distributed among the three participating colleges. For these reason, the analysis attends more closely to the participant group than to the nonparticipant group.

How Do CalWORKs Students Differ from the General Student Population on California's Community College Campuses?

CalWORKs students differ in a few ways from the typical student at community colleges in California. CalWORKs students tend to be slightly older (with fewer students under 21, and more over 30) than the general student body. On two of the three campuses, more of the CalWORKs students were new or continuing students than the general student body. (This may relate to the length of time that CalWORKs students stay enrolled in college and to the fact that many CalWORKs students have been enrolled previously, at an earlier point in their lives, as well as to the sizable number of individuals in the general student body who enroll in just a class or two as "new" students.) The CalWORKs population has a higher percentage of African-American students than the general student body, and — as one might expect, given that they are eligible for public assistance — a higher percentage of CalWORKs students are low-income ($15,000 or less per year).

Lessons from the Focus Groups: Critical Issues and Common Themes

The participants in these focus groups expressed many of the same concerns, and experienced many of the same obstacles, as the participants in the national Opening Doors focus groups conducted in 2001. Like the national study participants, CalWORKs students in these focus groups reported stressors related to time, money, and support. Their personal circumstances were often challenging; many lacked essential academic skills; and a large number were caring for sick children, parents, or partners — or were themselves suffering from health problems. Like the national focus group participants, students in most groups in the California study said that the most difficult issues they faced were general problems: stress, difficulties balancing their various responsibilities, and lack of time to be with their families.

On the other hand, compared with the national focus group participants, the California focus group participants — perhaps because they were almost all receiving welfare payments and support services through the community college CalWORKs programs — expressed significantly less anxiousness about child care arrangements and the need for alternative class schedules (such as weekend or evening classes). The CalWORKs support alleviated some of the need to work extra hours, which would correlate with fewer hours of child care and a less complicated schedule overall. CalWORKs participants also are provided with child care assistance[25] (generally in the form of reimbursements for expenditures or direct payments to providers) as part of their county-approved welfare-to-work package of supports or as part of the CalWORKs community college services.

Participants in the CalWORKs college programs expressed strong appreciation for the personal attention they received at the CalWORKs college office and for the assistance given regarding rules and policies. Beyond the educational and career planning and supportive services, students were grateful for an understanding ear when they were struggling to juggle their responsibilities or just needed some encouragement. Several participants said that they would never have been able to persist in their education were it not for the CalWORKs college program and its staff:

> I had no idea [the CalWORKs community college program] even existed, and I was coming . . . to see if some program could help me go back to school and literally walked in here and said, Can I speak with someone? Immediately spoke to [counselor]. Great counseling, step 1, step 2, step 3, and then I have the [county CalWORKs case]worker here. Any help that I need, I just walk by and . . . it's all taken care of. It is literally the one-stop center. . . . I get tutoring, counseling, book vouchers, anything you need, you can get here.[26]

> I love the CalWORKs here. . . . I was so confused, I didn't know where I was and what I had to do, but when I came here and I met with the CalWORKs counselors here, they set me on the right path.[27]

Nonparticipants who attended the focus group had various reasons for declining to take advantage of the CalWORKs college program.[28] Most had successfully devised a set of

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[25]In 2000-2001, the CCCCO reported that 7,975 children received child care services through the community college CalWORKs program (CCCCO, 2001).

[26]CalWORKs community college program participant, April 18, 2002.

[27]CalWORKs community college program participant, April 18, 2002.

[28]Recruiting current CalWORKs students who were not using available on-campus CalWORKs services proved challenging. A few of those who received letters from the colleges and who participated in the groups were not active CalWORKs participants. Some were receiving CalWORKs when they enrolled in college but had since left welfare; many had applied for services or had attended CalWORKs orientations (continued)

supports that suited their financial, personal, and academic needs outside the on-campus program. Some had family support to assist with financial concerns or with child care — something that was not as common with the participating students. Some had the attitude that they could get the help they needed on their own. A few did not know about the CalWORKs services. Participating students were asked to guess why CalWORKs students would not take advantage of the available services, and some felt that perhaps some nonparticipating students did not know about these services or might think that they were not eligible for these programs, suggesting that more marketing and outreach were needed to attract these students. Others felt that some students were ashamed or embarrassed to be seen going into the CalWORKs offices.

Although there were slight variations from college to college, students at all three colleges shared many of the same experiences and perspectives. Table 3 summarizes the themes from each of the six focus group sessions.

Overall View of Personal Circumstances: Supports, Obstacles, and Outlook

Many participants and nonparticipants in the CalWORKs college program appeared to be able to draw on a variety of supports to help them stay in school. Nearly all the students said that the statement "The college is supportive — they provide extra tutoring and counseling when I need help" was true. When asked, however, whether it was true or false that "The college steps in when I have a problem and actively helps me solve it," most participants said no.[29] Students seemed to experience the college (both the CalWORKs program and all other on-campus services and programs) as willing to accommodate many of their needs, if they — the students themselves — took the initiative to ask. Almost all the focus group participants said that their family or friends were supportive. A number said that family members watched their children when they were doing homework; some said that their children themselves tried to give them quiet time to study. Few students mentioned reaching out to churches or other nonprofit organizations to find support for their academic ambitions. Participants' experiences with professors seemed to vary; as in the national study, some instructors were accommodating, but others were more rigid. Some programs had a reputation for inflexibility; nursing and cosmetology, for example, have strict attendance requirements.[30]

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but had not returned for services. These nonparticipant focus groups, therefore, should not be taken as providing strong representative evidence of the outlook or behavior of most of the current CalWORKs participant-students who have not taken up CalWORKs college services.

[29]The number of false responses may have reflected how the statement was worded. Several of the focus group students indicated that the college would step in if the student asked for assistance, but the college usually would not do so unless prompted.

[30]Strictness is particularly likely in programs training toward a licensure examination, in which state-mandated standards exist for minimum hours of instruction.

Table 3: Focus Group Themes Across the Three Colleges

Hardly Mentioned	Sometimes Mentioned	Often Mentioned
Child care: Not a major barrier or issue for most of the focus group participants, perhaps in part due to child care assistance provided by the CalWORKs program; several students mentioned piecing together child care from various providers.	**Book reimbursement:** Difficulties receiving reimbursement from county in time to purchase books prior to start of classes, although students thought the program was beneficial; several students mentioned that it was difficult to "front" the money for the books.	**Advocacy:** Campus CalWORKs staff actively advocate with county CalWORKs on students' behalf, and many focus group participants described how this service had been helpful to them.
Class offerings: Class dates and times could be better suited for parents, but this was not a major barrier to education.	**Choice of majors:** Most students' majors were an independent choice, but some students noted that their choice was influenced by county CalWORKs approved list of majors. Others had run into difficulty when their chosen major was not on the approved list.	**Long-term enrollment:** Some spoke of taking many credits before deciding on a major, which may have made them ineligible for some services/loans. Others were delayed by changes in majors and stopping out periods necessitated by family/personal crises.
Housing: The price of housing was a concern for some students.	Financial aid: Financial aid counseling as part of orientation and core services was helpful to students; however, forms were seen as cumbersome (which is probably not CalWORKs-specific but possibly a complaint of all students).	**Remedial coursework:** Several students spoke of taking remedial classes, repeating classes, or needing special assistance to complete necessary coursework.[a] The academic counseling services provided by the CalWORKs program were very helpful in getting these students the assistance they needed.
Time limits: Students who were nearing California's 18/24-month work-trigger time limit were motivated to complete their programs despite the lost of benefits.[b]	**Marketing of services**: Students found that the CalWORKs program services provided them with needed assistance, more so than other on-campus counseling services. and they felt that the CalWORKs program should market itself to a broader set of students.	**Stressful life events:** Divorce, health issues, caregiving responsibilities, financial issues, health crises, family violence, and housing issues were major concerns for many participants.
Transportation: Most students access available stipends to use public or personal transportation, and other students did not have transportation needs.	**Support system/network:** Some students found peer support/networks to be more helpful than family networks when dealing with school-related stressors.	**Counseling and academic assistance:** Several students mentioned key CalWORKs community college staff by name and spoke highly of the assistance they had received to develop an education plan and to deal with academic and personal crises.
	Work-study: Work-study had advantages and disadvantages; it was seen as unattractive for some students because of limited earning potential. However, work-study positions allowed many students to focus more on school.	**Connection to other available services:** The CalWORKs program helped students access a number of on-campus and off-campus services.

NOTES: [a]See Grubb, 2001.

[b]One CalWORKs community college staff person reported that this may reflect the fact that letters from the county welfare departments that informed recipients who were nearing the 60-month lifetime limit were not mailed until June or July 2002 (E-mail communication, October 24, 2002).

Employers, too, ranged from being very accommodating to being unsupportive and inflexible, but most students reported that their employers were supportive. (Most work-study employers allowed study time and time off during exam periods, and large clothing retailers also seemed to be willing to shift schedules around to accommodate students' needs.) Students who were participating in campus CalWORKs programs had mixed reports about the supportiveness of their county caseworkers. Tables 4 and 5 summarize the focus group participants' reports about supports for and obstacles to school success.[31]

Table 4: Personal Circumstances: True or False?

This table summarizes the results of a card-sorting exercise (described in Appendix B). Students were given cards on which were printed statements about their current circumstances, and they were asked to sort the cards into "true" and "false" piles. At the end of a discussion about these statements, the cards were collected for later analysis. Percentages in this table indicate the proportion of respondents who said that the statement was true.

Key

All "true":	100 percent of respondents said that this was true for them.
Majority "true":	67 percent to 99 percent of respondents said that this was true for them.
Mixed:	34 percent to 66 percent of respondents said that this was true for them.
Majority "false":	1 percent to 33 percent of respondents said that this was true for them.
All "false":	0 percent of respondents said that this was true for them.

Personal Circumstances	Participants (n=37)
The college is supportive — it provides extra tutoring and counseling when I need help.	Majority "true" 97%
The college steps in when I have a problem and actively helps me solve it.	Mixed 58%
I have friends or family who help me stick with school even when it's hard — they give me emotional (and sometimes other kinds of) support.	Majority "true" 82%
I have found some really supportive people at a church / community organization.	Mixed 50%
I have good, stable child care.	Majority "true" 76%[a]
I have a good mix of financial aid, CalWORKs money, and work income so that I can manage.	Mixed 58%[b]
My employer is supportive — he/she is understanding when I have a big test or a project coming up.	Majority "true" 81%

[31]Because of the small number of nonparticipants who attended the focus group sessions, only summary information is provided for the participant groups.

Personal Circumstances	Participants (n=37)
The professors are supportive — they understand how difficult it is to balance working and school, and they are flexible (they provide extra help when I need it, and let me make up work if I have to miss class).	Mixed 60%
My CalWORKs caseworker at the county welfare office is supportive — he/she has been helpful in making sure my school counts toward my participation requirements, and he/she helps me make sure welfare rules don't get in the way of my college program.	Mixed 55%
I can finish my coursework quickly and get a certificate or a degree.	Majority "false" 32%
My program of study is linked directly to jobs — it will help me get a job I'm interested in.	Majority "false" 33%
I know people who have studied what I've been studying, and they have good jobs.	Mixed 66%[c]
I am already working in the field, and I know how my studying will benefit me at work.	Majority "false" 29%

NOTES: [a]Four participants said that they did not need child care, in most cases because their children were old enough to take care of themselves. These were not included in the denominator.

[b]Responses varied from school to school; in Grossmont, all the participants said that they had a good mix of money; in Santa Monica, only one-quarter of the participants said that this was true.

[c]Responses to this question varied from school to school; in Grossmont, 38 percent of participants said that they knew someone who had studied what they themselves were studying and that the person had a good job.

Table 5: Significant Obstacles to Success at School

This table summarizes the results of an exercise in which students indicated which of a set of obstacles listed on a poster caused them the most difficulties. Students could select one, two, or three obstacles by placing dots on the poster. The cells in the right-hand column show a percentage calculated as the number of dots that the statement received divided by the number of respondents.

Significant Obstacles to Success at School	Participants (n=37)
Lack of support at home	11%
Transportation	11%
Buying supplies	3%
Buying books	13%
Dealing with difficult professors	3%
Classes are not scheduled at a good time	26%
Courses aren't offered when we need them	16%
Hard to find child care	8%
Hard to get financial aid	8%
Housing is too expensive — I can't live near school /am afraid I will lose my housing	34%[a]
Hard to find time to spend with family	58%
It's hard to balance the work requirement and study time	42%
Dealing with the stress is hard	45%
Employers who are not flexible with work hours	11%

NOTE: [a]In Santa Monica, slightly over half the participants said that housing was a problem.

Results from the six focus groups clearly point toward the following key themes, which shape the opportunities for success for CalWORKs college students.

The help of an advocate with the welfare office was a critical support for some CalWORKs students. Although education is an approvable work activity for CalWORKs participants in their first 18 (or 24) months of TANF benefits, several students reported that their county caseworkers do not make it easy for CalWORKs participants to enroll in college or to stay there once they are enrolled. Several students in both the participant and the non-participant groups reported difficulties getting their county caseworkers to reimburse them for books, supplies, and transportation. One student reported that she was having trouble getting an extension to continue her education past her 24-month limit; although the CalWORKs campus program had helped her to formulate a community service plan that incorporated college study, the caseworker rejected the plan. The CalWORKs campus program then referred her to a nonprofit legal advocacy group, and eventually her plan was approved, allowing her to continue with college.[32]

Some students just need assistance with the strain of negotiating the system:

> I just recently went on welfare for the first time, and I felt like I was quickly getting into a very defensive mode because . . . they treat you very much like you're a criminal or something when you go on welfare, so coming here I felt like I had an advocate and actually [names a CalWORKs college case manager] . . . said, "Well, yeah, no, you have the right to continue to go to school, and don't let them tell you that, and don't be afraid of that," and they kind of advocated for me and let me feel like if I had some problems with welfare, I could talk to them and they'd give me good advice.[33]

Another student reported that the previous semester she had told one of the campus counselors that she was experiencing a lot of stress. "[He] suggested I go on medical exempt [from welfare participation requirements]. I could cut my units down without losing my benefits."[34] Another student said that the campus CalWORKs counselor helped her get her transportation funds reinstated after they had been cut off erroneously by the county. "He laid it all out for me — it was clear."[35] Several students said that the campus CalWORKs program had helped them to understand the benefits they were eligible for and had helped them with the paperwork to reimburse the costs of transportation, books, and supplies and to get child care. On one campus, students said that staff in the other services offices (EOPS,

[32]CalWORKs community college program participant, April 16, 2002.
[33]CalWORKs community college program participant, April 16, 2002.
[34]CalWORKs community college program participant, April 16, 2002.
[35]CalWORKs community college program participant, April 16, 2002.

CARE) did not understand these benefits. Several students were uncomfortable with the list of approved programs of study; a few in the participant groups reported that the CalWORKs college staff had helped them get alternative study programs approved.

> It . . . makes a difference if your major is not on the list of approved majors. If it's not on there, you either have to say you're in some other program or try to pretend that you are in or kinda be in it or something, when really that's not what you want to do. Physical Education is not on the list . . . they claim that they need more teachers; I don't understand why it wouldn't be on the list, but it's not.[36]

The director of one campus CalWORKs program reported that she has helped students petition for approval of courses of study that were not on the county's approved list. The welfare department and each of the 108 California community colleges work in concert to develop a list of approved majors that "will prepare students for an occupation that is in demand in the local labor market or that is in an emerging field that has documented employment potential." Each college is required to work with the county regarding training offered, and county signatures on the college's annual program plan ascertain that they have "established that these programs will provide CalWORKs participants with the training and experience necessary to secure employment."[37]

Counties themselves vary in the ways they implement the education option for participation compliance. In San Diego County, for example, which has contracted case management to several private companies (ACS, Maximus, and refugee subcontractors) in six regions, the campus CalWORKs director reported that experiences vary greatly depending on the contractor and area and, often, on the specific case manager. She said that some case managers would call to inform her when the contracting company was instructing case managers not to approve the education option.

Focus group participants on all three campuses agreed that county caseworkers varied a lot in their support for education — and, in general, in their knowledge of the rules and their ability and willingness to be helpful. Some students characterized the situation as "They don't care" and "You're just another number." One student expressed a common sentiment:

> Basically, I think they're there just for the money, they don't care about you. You call, and it's like you are bothering them. . . . I had two workers that just disappeared; they're gone. Now my whole caseload is screwed until I can get someone, someone who knows what they are doing. . . . I

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[36]CalWORKs Community College Program nonparticipant, April 18, 2002.

[37]See www.cccco.edu/divisions/ss/calworks/attachments/Ed_code_79202.doc (California Educational Code #79202).

> only had one good worker . . . she was really into helping her clients . . . [but usually] they don't help you at all, but they sure as hell will tell you when they are going to cut everything off.[38]

Other students, however, had more positive relationships with their caseworkers:

> I have one [county case]worker, and she sends me jobs in the mail every day. I have to be a detective, and she sends me job listings every day in the mail for police work.[39]

Most students also said that it was "the luck of the draw"[40] — some county caseworkers were seen as better than others, and several students said that their caseworkers had referred them to the campus CalWORKs services. One participating college has a county caseworker based full time at the CalWORKs program offices. Some focus group students were not aware that a county caseworker was available, and they were pleased to find out that they could receive assistance on-campus.

Finally, when the county CalWORKs office does not provide services quickly enough, some CalWORKs college programs step in to fill the gap. At Santa Monica College, the CalWORKs office has reimbursed students for books when the county has not come through.

Students appreciated the support of the CalWORKs staff. Several of the focus group participants simply valued the supportive attitude of the staff in the campus CalWORKs office. Here are some typical comments:

> It's kept me in school; [it's done] everything.[41]

> [The CalWORKs college program] gave us a reason to stay, a motivation.[42]

> I got child care through CARE, through CalWORKs. . . . They check [child care providers][43] out for you. . . .[44]

> I started school when my son was 1½, and I couldn't find good child care at first. . . . He lost a fingernail . . . he wouldn't leave the house with me,

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[38]CalWORKs community college program nonparticipant, April 17, 2002.
[39]CalWORKs community college program participant, April 23, 2002
[40]CalWORKs community college program participant, April 16, 2002.
[41]CalWORKs community college program participant, April 16, 2002.
[42]CalWORKs community college program participant, April 16, 2002.
[43]The CalWORKs community college program checks out each child care provider for those students who use a voucher to cover child care expenses.
[44]CalWORKs community college program participant, April 16, 2002.

> he was so afraid, but now [the CalWORKs program] helped me find a good center, and he's very happy.[45]

Often students seemed to be looking for nothing more than someone patient and knowledgeable who would listen to them with respect:

> When you go to a specialty program on campus, they're a little bit more supportive [than the regular counselors], and . . . sometimes you need a kick in your pants or someone so you can cry on their shoulder.[46]

Many students faced stressful personal circumstances that made it difficult to persist in school. Several students in the participating groups reported that they struggled, at least temporarily, with extremely stressful family and personal circumstances. One woman had dropped out of college the previous year when she learned that her husband had been abusing her daughter, and because her traumatized child was now "acting out," the mother was still struggling to stabilize her daycare arrangements.[47] Another woman was homeless with her toddler for several weeks at the beginning of the previous term, but she had remained enrolled:

> I remember when school was starting . . . I was involved in this relationship, my daughter was 3 months, and I think the first week of school, . . . the guy I was with tried to kill me and my daughter. . . .[48]

A number of women were caring for partners, parents, or children with cancer or other serious illnesses. One woman reported:

> [T]he last two years I've been taking care of my mother, she had cancer. She died last year, and so after she died, I thought, I'll go back to school — Well, [I] shouldn't have thought that, should've probably waited a little bit, taken some time . . . there's just life. . . . Kids get sick, the car breaks down, you know, it's not like the car breaks down and you get it fixed the next day — if you have money, yeah, but if you don't, it may be some months.[49]

Some of these students had received help directly from the CalWORKs college program staff — including personal counseling or referrals to on-campus and off-campus services. Those who had sought out this help were very appreciative of the attention, sympathy,

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[45]CalWORKs community college program participant, April 16, 2002.
[46]CalWORKs community college program participant, April 23, 2002.
[47]CalWORKs community college program nonparticipant, April 17, 2002.
[48]CalWORKs community college program participant, April 18, 2002.
[49]CalWORKs community college program nonparticipant, April 17, 2002.

and assistance they had received. For some students, various life events and stressors often led to an increased need for child care (because of extra demands on the student's time) and motivated some students to "stop out" of school, holding onto the hope of returning to classes when their problem was solved.

Remedial education and educational exploration slowed academic progress. Some focus group participants had found that they needed to take remedial classes in order to complete their major course of study — remedial math, in particular — which extended the length of time they needed to complete their college program. Some students had taken the same classes repeatedly without success before realizing that they needed remedial help, which often cost them extra time and money. Although students at each of the campuses seemed to be satisfied with the tutoring available, the time spent in remedial classes appears to slow down student progress toward a certificate or a degree:[50]

> [The CalWORKs counselor] helps me; she tells me I'm going to get there eventually; she shows me what I've done and lets me know what I need to do.[51]

> Well, sometimes I feel like I'm going nowhere because I've been here since '99, and she'll do my education plan and we'll go over it, and I'll say, "Well, I'm getting somewhere," because when I don't look at it, I feel like I'm going to be here forever, so those [counseling] contacts for me . . . motivate me by showing me that I've been moving from this to this to this. It shows I'm succeeding.[52]

> Some of these people that are coming back to school might have learning disabilities, and you're just going to make it harder for us to get to that time limit. That's anxiety right there. . . .[53]

In addition to the need for remedial study, some focus group participants reported that they had taken classes that they later found did not count toward their target degree or certificate. Other students reported that the college's academic counselors sometimes provided varying or, in the students' opinion, inaccurate information about necessary coursework: "I have gotten three different answers to the same question," said one participating student. Another student said that — in an earlier stint at the college and prior to her involvement with the CalWORKs community college program — she had been studying for

[50]Note that many community college students — not just welfare recipients — need remedial classes to prepare for college coursework. Nearly two-thirds of college freshman need some type of remedial assistance (Cloud, 2002).

[51]CalWORKs community college program participant, April 23, 2002.

[52]CalWORKs community college program participant, April 23, 2002.

[53]CalWORKs community college program participant, April 18, 2002.

two years toward a degree in business management and thought that she was halfway through, based on the previous academic advisement that she had received. When she returned to school, however, she spoke with a CalWORKs staff person who showed her that she had only two units that counted toward the business major. She then switched to a different major, Medical Office Technician, because she could finish it quickly; she hopes to complete the business program while working.[54]

Academic progress can also be impeded by the repercussions of students' complex and stressful lives. Several students reported having to repeat classes because they had had to drop out or had been forced out because of absences:

> I'm in the nursing program, and I don't care what type of problem you have: If you miss so many days, you're just out . . . if your child gets sick, you miss so many days, or you get in a car accident or just anything, you're just out, and you have to start all over again . . . or if you're failing a part of the program, you're just out . . . it's nothing the counselors can do . . . you have to get back in the lottery and go back through all the steps and then start all over again.[55]

Finally, many of the focus group participants had changed their minds about their major at least once.[56] Because of reality-testing, classroom experiences, and increased self-awareness of strengths, weaknesses, and interests, students' educational goals may change, leading to a more realistic and more appropriate choice of major that is more likely to lead to school and career success — just as in the general student population.[57] For low-income students, the time and expense of college may be a special burden, and educational planning does appear to help them stay on track and note their progress. Community college often affords students an opportunity to explore educational and career options, but time-limit restrictions many require CalWORKs participants to be involved in more comprehensive planning to meet their goals before they are sanctioned. Focus group participants reported:

> I love my Ed[ucation] plan, so I don't have to think and guess. . . . [I] know what I need to know. I have a focus, and then I just look for those classes.[58]

> I've been here since 1979. I have lots of Ws [for "Withdrawn"] and Fs on my transcript. But my campus CalWORKs counselor reminds me that

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[54]CalWORKs community college program participant, April 16, 2002.

[55]CalWORKs community college program participant, April 18, 2002.

[56]In the one focus group where it was specifically asked how many students had officially changed their major, 10 out of 12 had done so at least once.

[57]E-mail communication from Elena Farrelly, CalWORKs manager, October 24, 2002.

[58]CalWORKs community college program participant, April 18, 2002.

every time I've retaken a class, I've done it successfully. It's the slow path, but I'm getting somewhere.[59] [60]

Students seemed committed to completing programs of study that took longer than the 18 (or 24) months that were supported. The comments of one student who had selected a course of study that she could finish quickly — although it seemed to fit the pattern that caseworkers may expect — did not reflect the most common approach of the focus group participants:

> Why I took the Medical Office [Technician]: It had nothing to do with what I want to do, but I knew it was the quickest, easiest, free education I could get in three months and be able to go out to work, and *then* I could work toward my business management degree. [61]

Instead, many students said that they were enrolled in programs that would extend beyond the limit during which their education would "count" as an approved work activity. This, too, was a surprising finding, as the counties prefer that the CalWORKs participants enroll in a program that can be completed during the 18- or 24-month time limit.[62] Moreover, the real pace at which students proceed through college programs and the ideal pace outlined in education plans may not be a perfect match. In fact, on average, all community college students — not just CalWORKs students — need three and a half years to complete an associate's degree, since they are going to school and working.[63] One student was surprised to learn that it was likely to take her two and a half years to complete the program to become a nursing assistant :

> I thought that my program was going to be three semesters . . . 1,600 hours . . . but the way it works out . . . you can't go every single day . . . there are times that you just can't be there. You go from 3 to 8 Monday through Friday, so it's crazy. You're allowed to miss, like, 65 hours a semester, but that's like failing. They tell you that you can finish in it 1,600 hours . . . but that's not true; they don't tell you you have to do to summer school four to six weeks. . . . [Facilitator: How long will it take you in the

[59] CalWORKs community college program participant, April 23, 2002.

[60] Some students may have started their college education prior to the establishment of the CalWORKs community college program; therefore, some focus group participants may not have received the extensive and comprehensive academic advisement that is now offered.

[61] CalWORKs community college program participant, April 16, 2002.

[62] Counties cannot disallow a CalWORKs student's education plan solely because it cannot be completed within the time frame of 18 to 24 months.

[63] See Mathur et al., 2002.

> end?] Probably a semester of summer school and a semester in the fall. But I wasn't thinking I had to go to summer school.[64]

Other students early on formed an opinion that the expectation that they would finish quickly was unrealistic. Yet students were committed to their educational programs; no one in any of the focus groups said that she would stop her education because she had hit the time limit. Several said that they would simply accept sanction status for the last few months of their college programs. As one student said:

> Officially what I told my [county] worker, what she signed off on, was Licensed Vocational Nursing, but it's only four months past that certificate to get my AA Nursing. . . . What she told me [was], "You're right under your time limit, so you can do the last four months on your own"[65]

In California, a sanction currently affects only the adult portion of the welfare cash grant. CalWORKs participants who accept a sanction may still receive significant financial support for their children while they are enrolled in college (as would participants who had chosen any other work activity to fulfill their participation requirements). Nevertheless, CalWORKs students on sanction status lose all other CalWORKs-based school supports, including money for books, child care, and transportation but not access to campus college counselors.[66] Only a few students in the focus groups were currently in sanction status, however, and given the loss of these other supports, it may prove more difficult than students anticipate to continue in school under sanction status. Nevertheless, the level of ambition expressed by CalWORKs students can be taken as an indication of the degree to which the support programs have enabled these very low-income students to envision long-term study as a feasible endeavor.

Students valued their work-study positions, but only a small proportion of the jobs were related to the students' areas of study. All the students in the focus groups were working at least 10 hours a week, and many of them were employed in work-study positions.[67] Work-study was valued both because work-study employers tended to be more understanding about the pressures of going to school and working, plus the money earned in a work-study position was not counted as income against the welfare check since work-study

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[64]CalWORKs community college program nonparticipant, April 17, 2002.

[65]CalWORKs community college program participant, April 18, 2002.

[66]Note that the CalWORKs community college program does not serve students who are sanctioned.

[67]Statewide, about 17 percent (7,970) of the CalWORKs students received work-study placements in 2000-2001. Most (70 percent) were placed in on-campus jobs, half in clerical positions (CCCCO, 2001), and many students are enrolled in clerically related programs of study (E-mail communication with Lynn Fowler, Los Rios CalWORKs, September 2002).

counts toward the welfare-to-work activity requirement. One student voiced concern about the number of cuts in the work-study program and how it could affect her progress:

> They are cutting everything one by one, so we are worried. Work-study was one of them. We prepared our lives, our period of studying here, just to have work-study; we have our Pell grant, our EOPS [grant], so we can manage; we can have a bachelor's degree, so we can go directly to work; we can have a decent job for our whole life instead of being under CalWORKs regulation for the rest of our lives, so they cut work-study, and it is not possible[68]

Although many of the students were grateful for the opportunity to work on-campus and to receive assistance with finding a job, some complained that limits on the maximum number of hours in a work-study job (19.5 hours per week on one campus) meant that a work-study position would not allow them to earn enough to cover their expenses. Some said that they needed a second job; others said that they declined to take a work-study job in favor of private sector opportunities.

Some students found that retail jobs in the open labor market allowed them to set flexible schedules and to work longer or shorter hours as needed, depending on their class and personal schedule. However, whether they were employed in a work-study position or in the private sector off-campus, few students in the focus groups appeared to be currently working in a job that was related to their course of study or to their long-term interests. (This is, of course, true of many college students, who tend to seek jobs on the basis of convenience, flexibility, and pay rather than as a "career preparation" activity.) When asked about this, one participating student stated:

> Work-study is just a way for you to go on with your life for the time being, but it doesn't build any experience. For me, my major is accounting.[69]

On the other hand, on-campus work-study jobs offer students who have little or no work history an opportunity to develop basic employment and work habits and skills, in an environment that generally offers more supportive supervision and a wide array of career-

[68]CalWORKs community college program participant, April 16, 2002.
[69]CalWORKs community college program participant, April 16, 2002.

related placements:[70]

> I got a job through the campus. I told my boss that I need to cut down in the spring 'cause I'm neglecting my classes, and she let me go down to three days a week, even though that is a hardship for her to find someone else to train and fill in.[71]

One student noted that the work-study placement assistance she received was how she first became involved with the CalWORKs community college program:

> I received job services and help with [my] résumé and job leads through CalWORKs. That's how I first got involved. . . .[72]

Peer and social support from friends and fellow students was sometimes just as helpful as the support that students got from family members. Students sought support from a variety of sources. Many said that they found support from family members but that it often was uneven or undependable. Even the most supportive family member can have an off day. One student reported that her mother, who was generally enthusiastic about her college enrollment, interrupted her when she was talking about the stress of juggling school, work, and family:

> I was talking to my mom last night, and I was, like, you know: "Mom, I've missed, like, the last two weeks of school; one kid was sick one week, one kid was sick the next week, my husband has cancer, and I'm tired." And she was, like, ". . . I'll come live your life, and you can come live mine, and we'll see how well you cope," but that was kind of strange, because usually she's really, really supportive, but maybe I just caught her on a bad day.[73]

Another woman said:

> I get a lot of support from my daughter. She has a goal — my boys, they don't have any goals, they are just living day by day. But my daughter, she has a goal; she wants to be a lawyer, and so she gets on my case sometimes when she sees me doing my work; she'll even ask me if she

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[70]During 2000-2001, 70 percent of CalWORKs work-study positions were on-campus (CCCCO, 2001).

[71]CalWORKs community college program participant, April 23, 2002.

[72]CalWORKs community college program participant, April 18, 2002.

[73]CalWORKs community college program participant, April 18, 2002.

> can help me when I'm doing pre-algebra. So I do get support from her sometimes.[74]

Although children can be supportive, they can also undermine their parents' ability to succeed at school:

> My kids bug me all the time. I usually come home at 10, 10:30 at night, when the kids are already asleep, 'cause they won't even allow me to do my homework. Every time I sit down to do it, they come over and bug me, you know.[75]

Some family members actively discouraged students:

> I have to say the motivation comes from yourself . . . I don't spend that much time with my kids, 'cause I'm at school, and my kids complain. . . . With me it has to come from within, 'cause I don't have nobody to support me; everyone's kind of against me 'cause it takes a lot of time to go to school. Kids are complaining; my mom's complaining that I don't spend enough time with the kids; so it has to come from within yourself.[76]

Some students found that friends — particularly school friends — were more supportive than family. An immigrant woman explained:

> You have to separate friends from family . . . family doesn't always support you, but friends . . . can help you at school. At home you have to do your duty.[77]

Another woman said that she had recently found some new friends "who have motivated me to get it together and stay in school."[78] Many focus group participants said that fellow students (who composed a particular subset of friends) provided needed support by sharing notes, studying together, offering words of encouragement, sharing information about available resources, and providing in-kind support. Fellow students seemed to understand more accurately than family members did the kinds of difficulties that their peers were dealing with: teachers or employers who were not understanding, long days, lack of time to spend with children, lack of sleep, no time to study, and financial constraints.

Given how much students valued peer support, they preferred on-campus classes to distance learning. Because many students felt that peer-to-peer support was im-

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[74]CalWORKs community college program participant, April 16, 2002.
[75]CalWORKs community college program participant, April 16, 2002.
[76]CalWORKs community college program participant, April 16, 2002.
[77]CalWORKs community college program participant, April 16, 2002.
[78]CalWORKs community college program participant, April 16, 2002.

portant, distance learning and on-line classes were not viewed as viable alternatives to traditional coursework, even if they could provide more flexibility. Some students felt that audiotaping their classes helped with comprehension by allowing them to review the tapes again as needed — something that they said they would not be able to do with on-line courses. Given that word-of-mouth was an important means of sharing information about available assistance, distance learning may make it more difficult for students to find out about and receive needed assistance or services for which they may be eligible. In one focus group, a student suggested that distance learning could be supplemental to attending classes — computer-based instruction could be offered as a way of making up missed classes, for example, or as a way of offering the lecture part of a lecture/lab class. Several students agreed that that would be a good idea.[79]

Research Directions and Conclusions

The focus groups illustrate some of the value that students place on the services offered by the campus CalWORKs programs (and similar programs) and how these programs had helped them stay in school and succeed. Students provided numerous examples of times when campus CalWORKs staff offered advice, counseling, or access to supports that kept students on track and in college. Several students expressed the opinion that without elements of the campus program (such as work-study, advocacy with the county welfare staff, a supportive presence) they might not have stayed in school. Students testified to the importance of programs that stepped in to help them through difficult personal and academic circumstances. On all the campuses, some students had had this experience, and, on one campus, the program had checked monthly on students' progress and had contacted those who seemed to be showing signs of academic trouble. All three campus programs worked with students to generate education plans and career plans, but some focus group participants changed their majors — as many college students do — to better match their career goals and interests. Overall, however, the advantages of receiving the CalWORKs cash grant and supportive services are clear when one compares the lower levels of anxiety that California focus group participants expressed about child care and study schedules, compared with students in the national focus group study.

The themes that emerged from the focus groups point to areas of possible program improvement. A longer time limit could improve CalWORKs students' educational experience. Although the focus group participants seem to have had their needs met, more time to complete their educational programs would allow them greater flexibility in their educational and career planning. Particularly for those who enroll in remedial or noncredit courses to

[79]CalWORKs community college program participant, April 23, 2002.

prepare for their major area of study or for those students who wish to explore various degree and career options before pursuing a specific area of study, more time would be beneficial. Current time limits may not provide the flexibility needed to allow CalWORKs participants to fully explore their degree and career options. Given family and work demands, a longer time limit might relieve the anxiety that CalWORKs participants face in trying to complete their degree requirements before they are sanctioned.

Increasing outreach efforts — particularly efforts to describe all college support services and programs for the working and nonworking adult populations — may help to improve low-income students' access to community college. Some of the focus group participants felt that, with more outreach and marketing, the CalWORKs community college program could assist a larger group of students who were unaware of the unique and valuable services that the program provides. In addition, information about career ladders, degree or certificate timetables, and methods of obtaining these educational goals may assist low-income students in understanding what the pursuit of a college degree entails and how they can best prepare to begin a certificate or associate's degree program. Currently, the CalWORKs community college program is funded only to do statewide targeted outreach to young adults; there is very limited funding for outreach to CalWORKs participants.[80]

Cultivating more opportunities and emphasizing work-study positions or internships with greater relevance to the employment goals of CalWORKs students may help ensure that students leave with some program-related work experience (which may lead to better employment possibilities after graduation); it would also help students learn — early enough to allow them to change their study plans — whether their chosen career is one that fits them, as there is often a significant difference between the classroom experience and real world. This would also help expose the students to others working in the field. Finally, although the 10 nonparticipants who attended the focus group sessions appeared to be managing well, this says little about CalWORKs student-recipients who do not take advantage of the program.

The CalWORKs college support programs for welfare recipients in California's community colleges are clearly popular among the participants themselves. The focus group students testified eloquently about the value they saw in these programs; yet, however well appreciated the CalWORKs college program is among those who are taking advantage of its services, a study like this cannot distinguish the effects of the program from what students would experience in the absence of such services. As discussed above, the nonparticipating students have access to many of the same fundamental supports — book money, transportation money, child care — as the participants do. To identify the true value of the CalWORKs college support programs (particularly for students without supports at home or through ex-

[80]E-mail communication from Judy Reichle, CCCCO, October 27, 2002.

isting connections), the best approach would be an experimental comparison of randomly assigned program participants and nonparticipants, looking at effects on students' educational program completion rates as well as later employment, earnings, and use of public benefits. This kind of information becomes particularly important in times of public budget-tightening, when special programs like this become vulnerable to reductions or elimination.[81] Information that allows policymakers to see the payoffs — both to the individuals involved and to the public — of CalWORKs community college services helps to develop a powerful foundation of informed support.

In the current economic and employment environment in California, providing education and training to prepare low-income individuals —particularly, public assistance recipients — for jobs that can offer wages and benefits sufficient to support a family has been a key goal of public policy. Such jobs require skills and knowledge that many CalWORKs participants lack. Moreover, California's community colleges offer locally tailored vocational training programs that address the labor force needs of regional economies. A program like the CalWORKs college support program has the potential to help students who face numerous obstacles to career advancement take the next steps toward supporting themselves and their families.

[81]This study took on special urgency during the design phase in January 2002, when California Governor Gray Davis's fiscal year 2003 budget forecast was published. The State of California was facing an enormous budget deficit — estimated at $17 billion in January, but the spring analysis put the figure closer to $24 billion. Among the programs hit hard in the draft budget was the CalWORKs community colleges program, which was to lose all but its $15 million child care funding. Although much of the funding was restored in the revised budget published in May, many college CalWORKs programs were already being dismantled and would not be resuscitated. The Santa Monica College program was one of these. While this study documents student perspectives on the CalWORKs college programs and captures stories about the critical assistance that these programs have provided, the importance of the programs to the California State Legislature makes it appropriate to study their benefits: Which CalWORKs students benefit most from these programs? Which elements of the programs are important to student success? What is the cost-benefit ratio for these programs?

Appendix A

Summaries of CalWORKs Community College Programs on the Three Campuses

Grossmont College

Grossmont College is located in the rolling hills east of San Diego, in the city of El Cajon. Founded in 1961, Grossmont College now serves over 17,000 students, with an additional 8,000 enrolled at its sister campus, Cuyacama College. Grossmont serves a greater proportion of Caucasian students (approximately 60 percent) than does the California community college system as a whole, and more than the other two colleges in this study. A significant number of these students, however, are immigrants from eastern Europe, and a large number of the students at Grossmont College are working, low-income students.

The CalWORKs support program at Grossmont College is known as Project Workplace. The director, who designed the program, thought that a name that avoided immediate identification with the welfare system would remove one obstacle to participation. (Most campus CalWORKs programs use the term "CalWORKs.") To minimize confusion and reduce duplication, the director modeled the program on the campus Extended Opportunity Programs and Services (EOPS) system. Project Workplace operates out of three tiny offices next door to one another in a temporary building on the edge of the main campus green.

In academic year 2001-2002, Project Workplace served 258 enrolled CalWORKs students. Staff saw between 30 and 50 students a day to offer counseling and other assistance. Project Workplace works hard to draw in CalWORKs students. Staff place flyers in the EOPS office, send letters to CalWORKs participants who are identified through the financial aid office, and visit job fairs and other community events to spread the word about CalWORKs services that are available on-campus.

Students come in for an orientation meeting with Project Workplace staff. In this meeting, staff help students formulate an education plan to send to the county case manager, and students who are interested in child care or employment are sent on to staff who are knowledgeable about these resources. Once a semester, students return to review their education plans and to get assistance with book expenses; reimbursement requests go to the county, and Project Workplace covers expenses that the county denies.

Project Workplace staff are particularly effective in helping students work with county welfare caseworkers. Students in the focus groups emphasized that the counselors had solid knowledge of county rules and students' rights; the program director also felt keenly that one role of the campus staff was to ensure that students were able to exercise their rights to education as (at least) partial fulfillment of their work activity requirement. The director said that the most valuable aspects of the program are advocacy and empowerment: "Without this program making a commitment to advocacy, so many individuals would be lost, shoved into jobs, and not given an opportunity for education. It's the single

most important job we do for students. And [another important result of the program is] the empowerment that students feel when they learn that they can get what they want to get."

Santa Monica College

Santa Monica College opened in 1923 on a property only two miles from the Pacific Ocean. The location is accessible to a wide group of Los Angelenos; it is not far from central Los Angeles and is served by several bus lines, although parking space is hard to find. The college has a reputation for academic excellence (it has the highest transfer rate of any community college in the California system) and says that it has the largest international student population of any U.S. community college.[1]

The CalWORKs college program at Santa Monica College was established in April 1998, the month Los Angeles County implemented its CalWORKs plan. The program's director had run a program for welfare participants on another community college campus in the county, and she was familiar with the policies; she also made sure to hire staff who could understand welfare policies. In compliance with the program's open-door policy: Staff provide counseling services to anyone who says she is "on aid." To receive child care or work-study assistance, however, students need to provide evidence (ideally, a Notice of Action) that they are in the CalWORKs welfare-to-work program.

Santa Monica College's program serves approximately 65 students per week — 15 for child care, 24 for work-study, and 26 for general academic or personal counseling. In academic year 2001-2002, about 350 students were enrolled in the CalWORKs college program (out of approximately 1,450 CalWORKs participants on campus). To serve these students, the program was staffed by a full-time job developer, a full-time child care worker, a full-time manager, a secretary, and three part-time counselors (adding up to 42 hours of counseling available per week). One of the counselors had worked in a social services agency before joining the CalWORKs staff. Most of the staff time is spent connecting students to "hard services" such as child care and work-study; other time is spent in general counseling and occasional mediation with the county.

To recruit students, the program regularly sends letters to all identified CalWORKs participants every semester to inform them about the program offerings and works diligently with the Information Management Services to identify additional CalWORKs recipients from financial aid applications. Students who were interested in on-campus services would be asked to show evidence of CalWORKs receipt — generally, a Notice of Action — and would have a meeting with one of the counselors. The counselors go over academic and per-

[1]Santa Monica College Web site: www.smc.edu.

sonal issues as well as the welfare-to-work requirements. Counselors often help students with off-campus problems — homelessness, child care and schooling for children, and employment. The program staff find that students tend to come in first for the "hard services" — book money, transportation, child care — and later confide in the counselors about other, more personal issues.

The program's director has emphasized the role of counseling and work-study positions in helping students complete their education plans: "I think the absolute most important aspect is the counseling. It is what enables the student to stay in school; it's the support they get. But I also feel very strongly about the work-study on campus; it helps student comply with the 32-hour CalWORKS requirement, which makes the work less complicated."

Sacramento City College

The "seventh-oldest public community college in California," Sacramento City College (in the Los Rios Community College District) was founded in 1916, initially as part of a local high school. Located within minutes of downtown Sacramento, SCC provides affordable associate's degree, certificate, and general education programs to approximately 22,000 ethnically and culturally diverse students residing (mainly) in Sacramento and Yolo Counties. Nearly one in every ten adults in the greater Sacramento area attends one of the four colleges in the Los Rios Community College District, and over 90 percent of graduates from the district obtain jobs in their field of study.[2]

In May 1998, the SCC CalWORKs program began to provide a comprehensive set of educational, career, and personal counseling to CalWORKs participants. Housed in a campus office that also includes a "one-stop" center that provides job search and placement assistance (but is not part of the Workforce Investment Board's One-Stop system), the program is staffed by a supervisor, who is the program's director, two caseworkers, a counselor, a jobs services worker, and a county welfare worker.[3] Students can make appointments with staff or can drop in to receive help with personal issues (such as child care, family matters, housing) and transportation and education issues (book eligibility verification, financial aid, work-study questions, tutoring, and problems involving a professor). Overall, about half of the approximately 1,000 CalWORKs participants who are enrolled in the college seek services at the CalWORKs college program.

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[2]Los Rios Community College Web site: www.scc.losrios.edu.

[3]The county CalWORKs caseworker assists a caseload of 60 to 80 students with continuing cases but does not work with students who, upon enrollment, were not already registered in the CalWORKs programs.

Usually, the point of entry into the on-campus CalWORKs college program is an hour-long orientation for participants who are identified to the SCC CalWORKs staff by the county CalWORKs program or who are self-identified. Two orientation sessions are held each week, one during the day and the other in the late afternoon or evening, to accommodate a variety of student schedules. Orientation provides an extensive overview of the SCC CalWORKs program and other campus services; students also receive a number of clear and concise written materials describing program flow and the TANF school-work requirements.

In addition to the drop-in and supportive services mentioned, program staff send postage-paid reply cards to all students for whom an education plan is created, to find out whether the student's caseworker approved the plan as a welfare-to-work activity.[4] Staff also provide follow-up contacts to students who are deemed "at risk" of stopping out or dropping out (because of a large number of withdrawals, a grade point average of less than 2.0, repeating a class over and over without passing, and so on). Each semester, attempts are made by phone and by mail to reach approximately 250 or 300 students deemed at risk.

[4]E-mail communication from Lynn Fowler, Los Rios CalWORKs, September 3, 2002.

Appendix B

Additional Information on Focus Group Methodology

Focus Group Recruitment

The focus groups for students who were accessing CalWORKs services filled up very quickly, with 10 to 12 participants signing up almost immediately; some potential participants were turned away. Recruitment for the nonparticipating groups was much more difficult, with only small numbers calling in to be screened. Outreach to the nonparticipating students may have been hampered because the staff did not have contact with these students and may have found it hard to determine whether the students were really "nonparticipating," whether they were still enrolled, and whether their contact information was up to date. In some cases, the same student received both versions of the recruitment letter, since some may have attended an orientation or made an initial visit to the CalWORKs offices; but if it had been quite a while between visits, a student's name might also have shown up on the "nonparticipating" list. Because of difficulties recruiting nonparticipants, a "snowball approach" was used: Eligible nonparticipants who had signed up for these groups were encouraged to recruit friends and classmates who were eligible. This increased the nonparticipant pool somewhat, but in the end these focus groups were small, with only five students from two of the colleges and only one student from the third college.

Focus Group Administration

Facilitators led students through a combination of discussions and exercises aimed at gaining information about students' experiences managing school, work, and home responsibilities. After personal introductions, participants were given cards on which were written simple statements about the students' current circumstances (Table 4 lists the statements); participants were asked to sort the cards into two piles, one "true" and one "false." Using the cards as a focus, facilitators led a discussion about what students depend on to support them in combining school, work, and family responsibilities. At the end of the discussion, the facilitators collected each participant's two stacks of cards, with the participant's name affixed, for later analysis. The next discussion focused on students' courses of study, including questions about how they decided what to study, what they saw as their time line for completion of their program, and the outlook for continuing training. The third section of the session was the only element that differed in structure, depending on whether the focus group was composed of campus CalWORKs program participants or nonparticipants. Campus CalWORKs program participants were asked to discuss their experiences with the support program: what services they had availed themselves of, what had helped most, and what (if anything) did not work well for them. Nonparticipants were asked whether they were aware of the campus CalWORKs program and what they knew about it; then they were shown a poster listing reasons why someone might not take advantage of campus CalWORKs ser-

vices, and they were asked to identify which reasons kept them from enrolling. (They were also encouraged to offer reasons not already listed on the poster.) In the final activity, participants were given three adhesive dots that they could affix to a poster showing typical problems that they might encounter in balancing work, family, and school (see Table 5) . Participants were told to affix a dot next to the one, two, or three issues that were most critical for them. The group then discussed these issues, and the facilitators closed out the discussion by asking participants what suggestions they had that might make it easier to cope with these issues.

Data Analysis

Immediately following each focus group, facilitators and the research assistant met to identify the key themes and important comments in that particular session. All the focus groups were recorded on audiotape; during the analysis phase, facilitators reviewed the tapes to refine, change, or confirm these impressions. The audiotapes also allowed facilitators to identify representative or illustrative comments. The two exercises described above (sorting the true/false cards and affixing dots on the poster) provided data that the facilitators could use to compare the comments that students made in discussion with the anonymous information offered in these exercises. (In general, the information from the card sort and the dot count matches the discussion.) The exercises also allowed the facilitators to get a count of the issues of concern to the entire group of participants — even for those students who were not very vocal throughout the process — so that, in addition to the content analysis of the general focus group discussion, the cards and dots were tallied to help understand trends in students' circumstances and experiences. Tables 4 and 5 summarize these findings. Finally, MDRC shared a draft of this report with CalWORKs coordinators at the three campuses, asking for their feedback and for their help in identifying any findings that seemed to conflict with the sense that staff on the ground had of CalWORKs students and the campus CalWORKs program.

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The Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan social policy research organization. We are dedicated to learning what works to improve the well-being of low-income people. Through our research and the active communication of our findings, we seek to enhance the effectiveness of social policies and programs. MDRC was founded in 1974 and is located in New York City and Oakland, California.

MDRC's current projects focus on welfare and economic security, education, and employment and community initiatives. Complementing our evaluations of a wide range of welfare reforms are new studies of supports for the working poor and emerging analyses of how programs affect children's development and their families' well-being. In the field of education, we are testing reforms aimed at improving the performance of public schools, especially in urban areas. Finally, our community projects are using innovative approaches to increase employment in low-income neighborhoods.

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